

SELF EXTINGUISHING COMPOSITE PRIMARY STRUCTURE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

(a) Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to self extinguishing composite primary structures used on helicopters for increasing passenger safety.

(b) Prior Art

[0002] Helicopters typically have a number of points where crew and occupants/passengers can exit the helicopter. In the past, these egress points did not provide a desired level of protection for the crew and occupants/passengers should the helicopter be involved in an accident. In particular, these egress points lacked sufficient protection against fire.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide a self extinguishing composite structures which help increase the safety of the crew and the occupants/passengers.

[0004] It is a further object of the present invention to provide a helicopter having increased safety.

[0005] The foregoing objects are attained by the composite structures of the present invention.

[0006] In accordance with the present invention, a self extinguishing composite primary structure broadly comprises a core formed from a fire retardant material, which core has a first surface and a second surface, and at least one ply of a structural graphite prepreg material bonded to each of the first surface and the second surface.

[0007] Further, in accordance with the present invention, a helicopter is provided which broadly comprises at least one component formed from said self extinguishing composite

primary structure. The component may be an outer skin panel used in the cockpit section of the helicopter, an upper cabin door, a lower cabin door, floors, emergency egress hatches, and an upper door in a transition section.

[0008] Other details of the self extinguishing composite primary structure of the present invention, as well as other objects and advantages attendant thereto, are set forth in the following detailed description and the accompanying drawings wherein like reference numerals depict like elements.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIG. 1 illustrates a helicopter;

[0010] FIG. 2 is a sectional view of a self extinguishing composite structure in accordance with the present invention;

[0011] FIG. 3 illustrates a skin panel used in a cockpit section of the helicopter of FIG. 1 formed from the self extinguishing composite structure of the present invention;

[0012] FIGS. 4 and 5 illustrates a cabin section of the helicopter of FIG. 1 having a plurality of components formed from the self extinguishing composite structure of the present invention; and

[0013] FIG. 6 illustrates a transition section of the helicopter of FIG. 1 having an upper door formed from the self extinguishing composite structure of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT(S)

[0014] Referring now to the drawings, FIG. 1 illustrates a helicopter 10 having a cockpit section 12, a cabin section 14, and a transition section 16. As can be seen in FIGS. 1 and 3, the cockpit section 12 includes having a hatch 18 through which a crew member can egress the helicopter 10. Beneath the hatch 18 is an outer skin panel 20. In order to promote safety during an accident or a crash, it is desirable to form the skin panel 20 from a material which resists fire.

[0015] As shown in FIGS. 1, 4, and 5, the cabin section 14 of the helicopter 10 includes a cabin floor 22, an upper door 24 and a lower door 26 on each side of the helicopter 10 through which passengers and crew members can egress the helicopter, and emergency egress hatches 28 on each side of the helicopter 10. Typically, the upper door 24 includes a portion 30 formed from a structural material which surrounds a window 32. The lower door 26 typically has a plurality of steps 34 incorporated into it. In order to promote passenger and crew safety, it is desirable to form each of these components, with the exception of the window 32, from a material which resists fire.

[0016] As shown in FIGS. 1 and 6, the transition section 16 of the helicopter 10 includes an upper door 36 and ramp 60. Once again, in order to promote passenger and crew safety, it is desirable to form the door 36 and ramp 60 from a material which resists fire.

[0017] In accordance with the present invention, each of the skin panel 20, the floor 22, the upper door portion 30, the lower door 26 including the steps 34, the emergency egress hatches 28, and the upper door 36 is formed from a self extinguishing composite structure material 38. Referring now to FIG. 2, the self extinguishing composite structure material 38 has a core 40 formed from a fire retardant material. The core 40 has a first surface 42 and a second surface 44 opposed to the first surface 42. The core 40 may be formed from any suitable fire retardant material known in the art which self extinguishes in the event of a fire. In a preferred embodiment, the core 40 has a plurality of honeycomb cells filled with a Fiberglass material. One material which may be used to form the core 40 is a Nomex Acoustic Core sold by Hexcel Corporation.

[0018] The self extinguishing composite structure material 38 further has at least one ply of a structural graphite prepreg

face sheet bonded to each of the surfaces 42 and 44. in a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a plurality of plies 46 of said structural graphite prepreg face sheet are bonded to the surfaces 42 and 44. Each ply 46 is preferably a 350 degree Fahrenheit cure graphite cloth material impregnated with an epoxy resin material.

[0019] Each of the plies 46 is bonded to the surfaces 42 and 44 and to each other by a layer 48 of film adhesive. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, each film adhesive layer 48 comprises a 350 degree Fahrenheit epoxy structural film adhesive.

[0020] While the composite structure material 38 has been shown as being a planar material, the material may be manufactured into any desired shape. For example, the outer skin panel 20, the upper door 24, the lower door 26, the hatches 28, and the door 36 may have any desired shape and/or curvature.

[0021] Each of the aforementioned components can be formed by laying one or more skin plies or outer layers 46 of carbon fiber prepreg into a mold. A layer 48 of film adhesive is then placed over the plies or layers. The core 40 is then positioned within the mold. Another layer 48 of epoxy film adhesive is then placed over the core. Finally, at least one additional ply or layer 46 of carbon fiber prepreg is placed on top of the film adhesive. The component is then vacuum bagged and placed in an oven or autoclave and cured at 350 degrees Fahrenheit. The component may be cured with augmented pressure in the oven or autoclave.

[0022] As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, a helicopter has been provided which has a desirable set of safety features in the event of a fire resulting from an accident or a crash. Also, in accordance with the present invention, a novel self extinguishing composite structural material has been provided.

[0023] It is apparent that there has been provided in accordance with the present invention a self extinguishing composite primary structure which fully satisfies the objects, means and advantages set forth hereinbefore. While the present invention has been described in the context of specific embodiments thereof, other alternatives, modifications, and variations will become apparent to those skilled in the art having read the foregoing description. Accordingly, it is intended to embrace those alternatives, modifications, and variations as fall within the broad scope of the appended claims.